

An empire of images

Lucy Audley-Miller

In a world without television, newspapers, and high-speed rail links, how did everyone in the Roman Empire, from Egypt to Britain, know what imperial power was and who was in control? The answer was images, especially images of the emperor. Lucy Audley-Miller explores how these imperial portraits worked to bring the emperor into contact with his people.

Most people living in the Roman Empire never met their emperor. The vast majority of those inhabiting the diverse lands under his control came to share an idea of how their ruler looked through images of him. The emperor himself could not be everywhere, so portrait representations of him acted as a sort of substitute, and were regarded, in some senses, as actually being the emperor.

The importance of these images is indicated by the problems that faced the governor of a province in Turkey, when a slave sought the aid of the emperor Trajan by fleeing to a statue that represented this ruler. Usually, a slave's troubles would not have raised much concern, but because this particular one had addressed his problems directly to the emperor via his image, the high-status governor had to take notice of him and sent the slave on a journey of many miles to Trajan himself in Rome. The close relationship between emperors and their statues is particularly clear if the ruler was unfortunate enough to fall from power. After Domitian's disgrace, people took revenge on his golden statues by smashing them to bits with great delight, as if real blood and pain would follow every single blow. In the Roman world, statues were seen as a vital way of making the emperor present in the lives of his subjects.

Variety and change

Statues of the emperor came in all shapes and sizes. Some of them were colossal statues in public spaces; others, tiny statuettes in the shrines of private homes. They were also commissioned in a wide range of materials: most of them were bronze or white marble with details such as eye- or hair-colour added in paint; a minority, ivory, gold or silver. In addition to statues of the emperor and his family, there were coins bearing their portraits, weights, cake moulds... These portraits were not simply designed to flatter. They

conferred charisma and authority.

Over the hundreds of years of Roman rule, imperial images changed a lot. This was partly a product of new developments in contemporary fashions, but it also reflected shifting ideologies regarding how a 'good emperor' should look. The first emperor, Augustus, created an impression of stability by using pretty much the same image throughout his rule, so the people of the Empire saw him as enduring and vigorous even when the man himself was elderly. Later emperors, like Vespasian, chose to emphasize maturity and experience by appearing bald and wrinkly with a double chin. The second-century usurper, Septimius Severus, came to the throne by force, but his images deliberately made him resemble the earlier imperial family. Imperial portraits cleverly manipulated what people thought about new emperors by making them look like legitimate successors, or, in the case of Vespasian, who won through after the assassination of Nero and a year of civil war, by going back to the drawing board. In this way, these portraits made people around the Roman world view each new ruler as a logical conclusion.

Dissemination and types

Although image-styles changed, the sophisticated system that populated the Roman Empire with these images remained relatively constant. An imperial image-maker, perhaps acting a bit like a modern PR man, created a portrait of the emperor (and other important members of his family) so that when the people in the provinces requested an up-to-date image, a carefully styled version was ready to be sent out, which projected exactly the right vision of the ruler (perhaps a 'rough and ready' military man, or the best possible civilized and urbane senator). Local sculptors then used this centrally created image as a model to create many new statues. The original versions of these images

do not survive: what we have instead is the local copies of these portraits that sculptors all round the Empire made. No ancient text talks directly about this enormously important and time-consuming process – we learn about it purely from the archaeological record and the remarkable (and slightly weird) fact that hundreds of images found all round the Empire have the strands of the emperor's hair traced in exactly the same way. It's clear that these images were not the ones sent out from Rome, because they are often made of local stone according to local traditions in representation. It would have been counterproductive, dangerous even, for these sculptors and their clients to have invented an image of their ruler. By manipulating a centrally defined portrait, they show both creativity and investment.

Regional difference

The original image-type created in Rome provided a template that was adjusted by local people to suit different expectations: for example in the Greek part of the Roman world, they particularly liked to see their rulers naked, like gods. Sometimes this process saw sculptors translate the portraits made by imperial 'spin-doctors' into a rather different style to the one created originally in Rome. The emperor Marcus Aurelius, for example, usually appears (below left) in very life-like images as an unruffled, dignified ruler, with fashionable artificially 'permed' hair that was meant to show he kept up with important trends in dressing to impress. A new acquisition in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (below right), shows this emperor in a gilded bronze image, half life-size, with bright blue eyes (cobalt-coloured glass), a forked beard that sticks out at unusual angles from his chin, and with a slightly glum expression. This head is from Britain and has similar hair to that found on images of Marcus from Spain, or Italy (this is particularly clear at the back). But the over-all effect is very different. The emperor's usually cultivated self has been translated into an image rendered in local style – more compact, less naturalistic. The absence of eyebrows adds to this sense of abstraction, emphasizing his stare. He transfixes the viewer with a piercing gaze – less an individual than an icon.

Looking like the emperor

The production and dissemination of imperial images not only shaped perceptions of the emperor, it also had a real impact upon individual self-fashioning. The court developed new images for the ruler in response to important events. This could mean that new images of the ruler and his family appeared in the provinces fairly frequently, particularly in the second century A.D. when the portrait system was at its most efficient, and some people used these new looks as a reference-point in shaping their own personal styles. It has been said that when the emperor Hadrian grew a beard, the rest of the people in the Empire did too (well, the men at any rate). This is an exaggeration. Then, as now, there were lots of different ways that people wanted to be seen, and people used their bodies as a way of expressing their allegiances to a wide range of different fashions, ideals, and beliefs, but it is true that the emperor's image had an impact upon the way that some people wanted to style themselves.

The emperor and the empress were not necessarily the first people to develop a certain 'look', but their adoption of particular styles or attributes multiplied their popularity in a comparable way to the manner in which people relate to celebrities today. Not that this analogy trivializes our material. The images of the emperor and his family were not only vital in allowing people to articulate what imperial power meant to them; they also changed the way that people saw themselves. In this way, people of different skin colours, ethnic identities, and religions were given a communal language with which to express their stake in Empire.

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